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Special Issue: Time-tricking

Theoretical Introduction:

Can Time Be Tricked? – On the Future of Temporal Agency

Felix Ringel

Abstract:

This theoretical introduction develops a conceptual argument stemming from the concept of 'time-tricking'. Whilst most theories of time in anthropology develop a coherent definition of the nature of time, for instance, as 'cyclical' or 'linear', I here explicate a metaphysical distinction in our temporal ontologies, the one between the ontology of the past and the ontology of the future. This distinction allows me to do two things: first, I present two different versions of time-tricking, one focusing on temporal representations, another conceptualising their effects; second, I present the future as the main object of temporal agency. By developing the term 'future-tricking' I establish a specific kind of temporal agency, which is heavily embedded in present politics, interests, and possibilities. I thereby contribute to an epistemic approach to the anthropological study of the role time and particularly the future play in human lives and practices.

Keywords: epistemology, future, ontology, post-industrial infrastructure, temporal agency, time, time-tricking

Can Time Be Tricked? – On the Future of Temporal Agency

The *FMS Gera* is the last German side trawler. Side trawlers are steam-powered fishing ships, which, in contrast to contemporary fishing vessels (so-called stern-trawlers), haul their trawl nets inboard over the boat's right side – portside, that is, in nautical language. She is a proud 65.55m long, 10.30m wide, and weighs approximately 1473 tons. Initially built in 1959/60 in what was then the socialist German Democratic Republic, she was for many years part of the East German high-sea fishing fleet, operated by the Rostock Fishing Combine. After the fall of the Berlin wall, she became a museum ship in the homeport of former West Germany's fishing industry, the North Sea harbour city of Bremerhaven. The city's Historical Museum uses the *Gera* as an outpost in the tourist hotspot of the Fishery harbour. She now is a vessel for knowledge, depicting the fishermen's hard working conditions of the times when the city and the harbour were busy and bustling. Back then, Bremerhaven was one of the richest cities in Germany; today, it is one of the country's poorest.

I am aboard the *Gera* and the museum's conservator gives a tour for the few visitors who have made their way into the harbour in the usual dump autumn weather. The tour is part of the national *Open Monuments' Day*, one of the many annual events supporting the touristic re-use of this kind of post-industrial infrastructure. The ship was, indeed, a place of industrial production. However, the once bright idea of transforming it into a heritage site in order to inform visitors about the local past has tarnished; twenty-five years after reunification it turns out to be quite a burden. The in any case financially precarious museum suffers from declining visitor numbers. This decline is made more severe by the recent opening of various popular tourist attractions in Bremerhaven's newly revamped city centre, including two privately run museums, the *Climate House* and the *German Migration Centre*. It lacks

financial support from the heavily indebted city and struggles even to upkeep the main building and its comprehensive historical exhibition. A ship like the *Gera*, moored in the open air, produces a variety of additional problems.

The conservator takes us from the prow of the *Gera* down into the ship's hull, to the bridge, and finally to the very rear. In much detail, she depicts recent conservation projects. Step by step, she reveals more obstacles they have been facing over the last years: financial, technical, chemical, epistemic ones. Some projects took much longer than expected because her team at first had to find the right colour, fit, or tool; others required more funding than they had (or would ever have, as she ironically puts it) or a different kind of expertise than they could offer. All undertakings had to be tailored to Bremerhaven's weather conditions and the *Gera's* actual constitution. At the end of the tour, she summarises her team's efforts in a smiling and (in no way bitter) throwaway remark: once they will have completed their work on one end of the ship, they can just about start again at the other. If they can catch up with the process of disintegration at all, I hasten to add.

This contrasts with the claims of the museum's website: 'On this 66-metre long outpost of the *Historisches Museum Bremerhaven* time stood still over 50 years ago. From the trawl net on the fishing deck to the saucepans in the galley and the captain's uniform in his cabin – everything is in its right place…' (http://www.museumsschiff-gera.de/?page_id=1079&lang=en). This is obviously the conservator's official time-tricking task: to stop time. However, as she aptly put it: time did exactly *not* stand still – or rather certain biological, chemical and physical processes of decay and decomposition did not. The ship's slow and, in the long run, presumably determinate disintegration on a molecular level is ceaselessly spurred on by the brackish harbour water, salty air, heavy winds and regular rain showers. Conservators will immediately discern the challenges the *Gera's* conservation entails, and the particular time-tricking they involve.

Here, we encounter an example in which a certain physical form – an otherwise rather solid, heavy and robust form at first sight – slowly, but constantly disintegrates. A few meters down the road, we find the opposite situation. The former auction hall for the incoming fresh catch has also been put to new use. Where once tons of fish were auctioned and sold every day, and thousands of workers earned their living, now either unoccupied emptiness reigns, or some small-scale new businesses have been – often only temporarily – established. The biggest part of the altogether 547.4m long building, rebuilt in 1982, is used for educational purposes. Two vocational training centres have opened, instructing future workers for Bremerhaven's currently stumbling offshore wind farm industry. The future electricians are to benefit from the city's enormous re-industrialisation efforts targeting renewable energies.

These parts of the auction hall have been renovated with the help of the EU, as the many European Social Fund and European Regional Development 'Investment in the Future' signs indicate. There is fresh paint on the walls; standard dark grey and blue office carpets have been laid; new seminar rooms, workshops, toilets and changing rooms have been fitted with customary furniture and equipment. Only the kitchen looks old-fashioned. Either it was brought here from another project of the same training company, or it was left from the previous occupant. Either way, there has been much investment in this building, at least in these parts. Nonetheless, every morning and especially Mondays after the weekend closure, the two instructors of one of these centres, the Bremerhaven Wind Centre, have a duty first thing in the morning: they have to thoroughly air all rooms.

As one immediately notices on touring the premises, the walls reek of fish. Obviously, the remaining fish processing companies in the harbour also – depending on what they produce and the actual wind direction – emit the kinds of fish odours that could cause this smell. But this is different. Even after more than a decade of reuse, the former auction hall is olfactorily filled with traces of its past usage. These traces, again, are in some way or another working on a molecular level, and it is an awkward feeling to know that, when you smell the

fish of old, there must be a substantial connection between your nostrils and, for instance, the bowels of a freshly gutted herring from the late 1980s. So here, time has not done its work properly. The past lingers despite all incitements to move on. Is the instructors' morning airing procedure the same kind of time-tricking as the conservator's preservation work? And what does 'time' actually have to do with all this? Or in other words: what is actually tricked in these moments?

In this short theoretical introduction, I will use these two ethnographic vignettes to show the kind of analytical and conceptual work that can be done with the notion of time-tricking. Time-tricking, I suggest, can help us think about fundamental anthropological problems: time, the future and temporal agency. It does so by forcing us to consider what people believe they are actually tricking when they trick time.

Before getting started, I would like to make an initial remark on time. Most scholars would agree that time itself can, on a very basic level, be defined as the succession of 'before' and 'after'. This kind of succession cannot be tricked (as far as I know, time travel is still confined to fiction). What can be tricked is, first, our *perception* of time's succession, and, second, the *contents* of time's succession. Usually, these contents are defined as events or moments, but the procession of time can also be fairly uneventful. In order to claim that the contents of time can be tricked, I have to put forward a metaphysical (in philosophical terms: ontological) argument. I do so despite my conviction, that recent non-ontological, explicily epistemic takes on time (e.g. Bear 2014b; Miyazaki 2004) already offer a solid safe-haven for the analysis of the role time plays in human life. In contrast to, in current anthropological terms: ontological concerns about the nature of time, I want to draw a metaphysical distinction between the past and the future. Building on this commonly implicit ontological distinction by my informants, I argue that humans, when attempting to trick the contents of time, actually engage in what I want to call future-tricking. And future-tricking, as I hope this

special issue demonstrates, is something worthwhile, that we as anthropologists should engage in more explicitly (potentially cf. Nielsen 2011 -- less so Nielsen 2014, read again!).

Tricking Knowledge about Time vs. Future-Tricking

The two introductory vignettes underline that time is a tricky issue. Anthropology – along with many other disciplines – has never had an easy relationship to time. Several anthropologists have attested to this difficult relationship, notably Nancy Munn (1992), Alfred Gell (1992), Matt Hodges (2008) and Laura Bear (2014b). Their overviews of the anthropology of time span at least from Durkheim's conception of time as social time, and all of them laudably argue for a more complex and explicit approach to time, whose pervasiveness, following Munn (1992: 93), is indeed 'an inescapable dimension of all aspects of social experience and practice'. As she convincingly argues, this dimension needs further analytical and theoretical attention. Gell, however, encouragingly underlines that there 'is no need to be in awe of time, which is no more mysterious than any other facet of our experience of the world' (Gell 1992: 314). The idea of time-tricking is to be understood exactly in this vein. Whilst this term immediately re-raises the question of temporal agency, which has long lacked specific attention, it also prompts at least two further investigations: first, into our own thoughts about what time actually is, (cf. Hodges 2008); and, second, as I argue here, into our metaphysics of the future.

The term time-tricking can be understood in two fundamentally different ways. The first one refers to practices that manipulate, coordinate, structure, or reorder knowledge about temporal processes. These practices trick *with* time on an epistemic level. The second one actually works *on* time, with other temporal metaphysics in mind. Whereas the first version seems rather obvious, the second deserves further explication. The central question is, again, *what* is actually being tricked when people do not trick knowledge about time, but time itself? I will start with unpacking the first notion of time-tricking, tricking *with* time.

Much has been written about the many different, creative and often very existential ways that human beings operate in and with time (e.g. Hoskins 1996; Orlove 2002; Ssorin-Chaikov 2006; Vigh 2008). They include all kinds of temporal knowledge practices, with which I mean references to, or invocations of, the past or the future in the present of referencing. However, for anthropologists, references to times past are often not important because they address the past, but because they tell us something about the present we investigate, and its potential futures. These representations of the past are, in this sense, timely, rather then 'of time' or 'of the past'. As contemporary matters, they are defined by present-day interests, conflicts and negotiations (e.g. Boyer 2006; Ringel 2013).

Consequentially, knowledge of, for instance, the past, is easily tricked: one can conceal certain aspects, rewrite history, focus differently, or even trick oneself with more favourable accounts and slight adjustments against one's better knowledge. Whether as actual lies or self-assuring deceptions, what is tricked is a social, contextually concrete representation of the past, often deeply embedded in long-standing social or political conflicts. Anthropologists refer to such practices as temporal politics, describing epistemic clashes, such as the ones that the large body of literature on memory tracks (e.g. Antze and Lambek 1996; Kaneff 2003). All we are altering here is our present *perception* of past events, not the events themselves: the *Gera's* conservator cannot affect how the ship has been built, used or preserved over the years of its existence; nor can the instructors undo the use of the hall or the gutting of the 1980s herring. However, as I did in the beginning of this introduction, I can present a selective account of the past to fit into the genre and format of a certain context, here the one of this theoretical introduction.

Tricking (scientific as much as non-scientific) knowledge about the past strongly links this form of time-tricking to an epistemological approach to time more generally. As Barbara Adam (1990: 38) underlines: 'Any reality that transcends the present must be exhibited in it.' What counts for the past, therefore, also counts for the future, or rather for representations of

it. Still, there is more to what Munn, in turn, refers to as a 'temporalization', the 'basic sociocultural processes through which temporality is constructed' (1992: 116), when it comes to the future. What I have in mind are the actual effects, and intentions, of temporal representations, particularly the ones of the future, which, as Munn also emphasises, have long remained analytically neglected.

This takes me to the discussion of the second version of time-tricking: future-tricking, i.e. a tricking *of*, not *with*, time. This approach allows me to answer the question about what is being tricked differently in this version. I base this discussion on the rather simple fact that many people implicitly assume a different ontological status of the future, when they try to affect it. This does not contradict Adam's epistemological approach, but it adds a metaphysical distinction to the debates on what time actually is.

The topic of the future offers a new perspective on both time and temporal agency. On the level of epistemic representations of the future similar restrictions remain. They are also heavily embedded in the present, and can be variedly more u- or dystopian, filled with hope or despair, viciously deceptive, naively optimistic, or in some horribly or wonderfully efficient way convincing to the extent of becoming prophetically self-fulfilling. Many ethnographic examples show that people assume that past events cannot be altered, and that they can only change their and others' perceptions of past events. As I underlined above, the *Gera's* curator does not attempt to change the way the ship was dealt with in the past, but she wants to secure the ship's future existence as a vessel of knowledge about the past. By maintaining the ship, she attempts to change the course and contents of *future* events, implicitly assuming that future events can be altered.

By predicting, forecasting, prophesising, conjuring, pro- and evoking, adumbrating, dreading, hoping, planning, projecting, envisioning, arranging, intending, designing, budgeting, aligning, organising, coordinating, we attempt to subject the future content of the progression of time to our agency. Much human practice is directed at making one's desired

outcomes more probable, and like the conservator or the instructors, we might actually accelerate, decelerate, interrupt, or delay if not time itself, then particular future contents of time or relations between these contents. This is when time-tricking goes beyond matters of representation. Any relation to the future is therefore pregnant with potential for actually tricking time, whose 'real' contents is affected. Importantly, as I argue elsewhere (Ringel 2014), such practices do not have to result in the emergence of something new; they also effect, as the recent special issue on modern time (Bear 2014a) variously emphasized, the maintenance and endurance of certain practices, infrastructures and ideas.

This second version of time-tricking, then, works *through* temporal representations, with its own ontological foundations and transformative effects. By planning, for instance, we attempt to bring the intended future into existence. This can fail: present predictions of the future can turn out to be either true or false in the future; they might remain 'elusive promises' (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013). We still manipulate temporal processes: we can actually slow down or speed up our own practices in relation to those of others; we can install specific rhythms, structures, and temporal orders that shall coordinate social life in the future. Much insight has been gained from such practices and their distinct effects, in the anthropology and wider sociology of time (from, e.g., E.P. Thomson 1967 or James and Mills 2005). But if this is the case, than we again have to clarify how to ground the possibility of this kind of temporal agency in the first place.

For instance, Captain Cook's untimely death on Hawaii, subject of the famous Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate (Sahlins 1985, 1995; Obeyesekere 1992), is such an effect of the manipulation of the contents of time. But whether we conceptualise his death as simply stemming from a terrible cultural (in current anthropological terms: ontological) misunderstanding of the timing of his return (Sahlins' position) or rather from concerted and conscious time-tricking efforts by confronting local interest groups (Obeyesekere's standpoint), makes all the difference. Whether particular Hawaiians really thought that Cook

was their god Lono or whether they used this argument to gain an advantage, entails the projection of very different ontologies of time by the analyst. The first one explains the – from Cook's perspective – lethal effects of these representations of time and its necessary future(s) as deeply embedded in local ontologies of circular time; the second one works without a ontologico-temporal othering and presumes the same understanding of the linearity of time at work in local practices. More importantly, these approaches differ in their understanding of both: temporal agency and the succession of time. Whereas the first explanation sounds deterministic in that one understanding of time (cyclical) had to lead a certain outcome (which is still effected by a specific kind of temporal agency), the second explanation emphasizes with a different understanding of agency the openness of the content of the future: Cook could have also not been killed if other futures had been favoured in the Hawaiians' debates.

The *Gera's* conservator understanding of her own temporal agency mirrors the latter explanation. She also has a clear-cut idea of the future, in this case the ship's future (in a linear conception of time), and she knows that if she was not to intervene, the *Gera* would be more or less disintegrated in, say, at least three decades. By her interventions, however, she pushes this otherwise probable future further back in time, filling the contents of the time before that with different futures. In her ontology of time, she can bring by a different future than expected. She has, in this sense, tricked the future on the basis of giving it a different metaphysical quality than the past.

However, the idea of future-tricking also points to the limits of temporal agency, which oddly enough can be described in epistemic terms. What about future contents that become present despite not being previously predicted? Cook's death, for instance, could also be seen to stem from the workings of time itself: the mast of the ship could as well not have broken and thereby forced Cook's fatal return. This obviously does not constitute a mystic dimension of time. Rather, it shows the limits of our attempts of temporal representation and

the effects we can have on the future. Time is tricky yet again: it seems even as if time can trick us back – such as it keeps on tricking the *Gera's* conservator, the vocational instructors in the former fish auction hall, or Captain Cook back in the 18th century. Temporal processes, therefore, continuously produce situations, in which agency is lacking, and in which actual temporal agency with regards to actually 'changing' the future arguably remains an illusion. Still, the presumed ontological openness of the future, which differs in relation to the metaphysical quality given to the past, allows and invites agency, and at the same time it proofs the ideas we have about its nature in each act we direct towards it, whether the attempt of time-tricking is successful or not. That there is temporal 'succession' is the basis for this kind of tricking; the contents of time is tricked because we know that the current present is necessarily to change.

The future's (and thereby also time's) inherent openness does not always lead to sudden surprise, shock, terror, amazement and astonishment. In less dramatic situations, time slips out of our hands more subtly. However, particularly the future continuously flees our epistemic grip. A moment of crisis, as the world has recently experienced in abundance, can often be extended to periods of chronic crises (cf. Vigh 2008), where representations of the future can only ever be unconvincing. Often we are made aware, that we cannot the future convincingly at all. Jane Guyer (2007) felicitously described this as a form of 'enforced presentism', which, she argues, is currently paired with a widespread form of 'fantasy futurism'. Both, enforced presentism and fantasy futurism, however, take temporal agency away from those they subject to their epistemic logic. When we counter such presumed inabilities to get a hold on, and then potentially trick, time, we regain temporal agency by applying agency over precisely the future, that we or our informants tentatively trick.

The individual contributions to this special issue give plenty of examples in which, next to social and material relations as well as rhythms and sequences, yet further temporal matters as well as time itself in form of the future are the target of human practices. The

authors' informants thereby predominantly target their current futures: they attempt to alter the future so that it does or, indeed, does not become the present (in the future). These manifold efforts to manipulate the future open up time as a subject to agency. In the next section, I show how this affects our ontologies of time, and our conceptions of temporal agency.

Time and Agency

Recently, there have been widespread concerns about what there really is, in Anthropology. This is understandable in many ways, one being that there seems to be a hardly coherent abundance in political, ideological and cosmological discourses on the nature of the times we are living in. Our current so-called 'acceleration of time' seems to speed up our ontological imaginaries, and spark new accounts of what there really is (potentially: cf. Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2013).

Such ontological meanderings are obviously not new to the discipline, and hit it time and again. Time as a metaphysical issue is itself an obvious problem for ontological thought. With regards to the anthropology of time, we find, for instance, references to what contemporary anthropologists would refer to as ontology in and around the 1970s oil crises (Geertz 1973; Bloch 1977) and in the emerging post-Cold War world throughout the 1990s (cf. Sahlins-Obeyesekere-debate above). Both debates raised the question whether two (in anthropological jargon:) 'ontologically' exclusive positions exist with regards to how people conceptualise time as either existing in a linear or a circular fashion. In both cases, these concerns were answered with accounts of how these different representations of time are actually not exclusive, and human agency is much more creative and inclusive then the anthropologists expected (Howe 1981; Borofsky 1997). Howe's and Borofsky's accounts respectively seem to infer that the social construction as well as the personal experience of

time remain an epistemic issue. And here I want to insert again the metaphysical distinction between the past and the future.

It was throughout the 1990s that the anthropology of time conceptually proceeded with force. Leaving the issue of cultural differences aside, many contributors to this body of literature differed in that they explicitly deployed an epistemological approach. Whereas Gell (1992) created an account of time as an epistemic, metaphysical and phenomenological issue, Munn (1992) and Greenhouse (1996) fused practice theory and phenomenology with concerns about culture. This cultural approach stayed with the discipline (recently influential: Guyer 2007; Orlove 2002), although it seemed more like a way of sidestepping a proper theory of knowledge. Matt Hodges has picked up the issue of 'temporal ontology' again in 2008, and provided the most detailed reflection about the nature of time, proposing a Deleuzian ontology of 'flux' (versus 'progress'), a form of constant emergence as a way out, again, of different cultural and anthropological ontologies of time. I agree with him that such ontologies need to be made explicit. However, temporal ontologies, as I have shown above, should also be specified with regards to different ontological characteristics given to different temporal dimensions. In most human practices, different *logoi* of what there really (onticly, so to speak) is concerning time, are in place. With the second time-tricking alternative of future-tricking, we can add to this ontological complexity: tricking the knowledge about time works with presupposing that the past has existed, but cannot be tricked; future-tricking, on the other hand, presupposes that the future does not yet exist, in order to be able to trick it. With this in mind, the answer to the question of what is tricked, is a simple one: all potential future presents and their possible 'actualisations', to deploy Deleuze's term via Hodges. This also allows a new consideration of temporal agency.

Given time's acclaimed pervasiveness and, subsequently, the ubiquity of human temporal agency resulting from it, there are surprisingly few accounts of temporal agency. The first prominent one after Obeyesekere and Howe is Carol Greenhouse's 1996

contribution, in which she links time and agency through concerns about power, empire and cultural change. However, in her case, innovations and reconfigurations of temporal agency remain thoroughly embedded in the concept of culture. As in Guyer's case (2007), knowledge practices are then conditioned by their cultural contexts, and epistemic relations to time follow that same somewhat limiting as well as enabling logic.

In contrast, both versions of time-tricking from above underline the multiple capacities to relate to time in any socio-cultural context. Guyer herself proposed one version of temporal agency that mirrors my first version of tricking *with* time – namely the term 'temporal reasoning' as the 'reach of thought and imagination, of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals, in short, of the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world' (2007: 408) – which, although in different times and spaces with different emphases and configurations, still allows for all kinds of temporal agency. I described one example, in which the inhabitants of an extreme case of an East German shrinking city managed to collectively carve out new epistemic domains that sidestep the dominant once of 'enforced presentism' and 'fantasy futurism', or rather of 'no futurism' (Ringel 2012), thereby regaining an epistemic and thereby practical hold on their near futures. Culture did not seem necessary to analyse these efforts. The same counts for Alfred Gell's (1992: 235f) take on temporal agency: his idea of 'temporal maps', which sidesteps the notion of culture and rather works between the domains of personal experience and metaphysics. Recently, Laura Bear (2014b: 14-16; cf. also Vigh's 2008 idea of 'navigation') has picked up Gell's idea of temporal maps, and I agree with her critique that we should account for the *social* manoeuvring on these maps and thereby go beyond Gell's phenomenological emphasis.

As we see, there are already a few conceptual propositions, which can help us to account for temporal agency. Time-tricking adds to these a clear focus on the future as the domain which is most commonly subjected to temporal agency. The underlying logic for this

is that, although people often occupy themselves with representations and conflicts about the past, the future is given a different metaphysical quality, which allows it to be subjected to human agency in the first place.

Conclusion: Time for the Future

Time-tricking invites us to follow this rugged genealogy of temporal agency, and human relations to time. Some of the ways in which it can be productive, I hope to have indicated in this brief theoretical introduction. Whilst I leave the reader with the idea of future-tricking in an encouraging gesture, I want to stress yet another point made recently by Laura Bear (2014b: 6): the knowledge practices, which we are concerned with in this issue, as much as the agency that is claim with them on the future, do not happen in thin air. Bear's emphasis on 'the labour in/of time' (ibid.) for very good reason refers to the political economies and power relations in which such temporal practices, indeed, all knowledge practices, necessarily take place. Although the term 'time-tricking' facilitates metaphysical focus with an initially playful point of departure, I do not perceive it as an uncritical, apolitical term. In contrast, the ontological assurance, that the future can be tricked, and that the experimentation with knowledge might be a good starting point for that, entails an incitement for further future-tricking. Since both, the training centre and the Historical Museum are threatened by closure because of dwindling funding, the conservator's and the instructors' continuous attempts of time-tricking in order to guarantee the reuse of their post-industrial infrastructure are, therefore, embedded in a whole bundle of attempts to trick the future in precarious times.

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